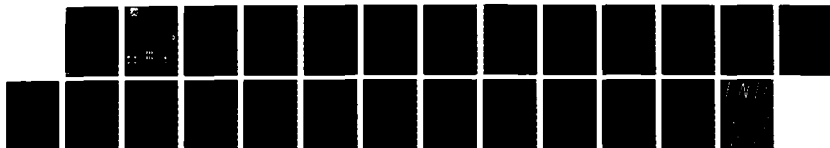


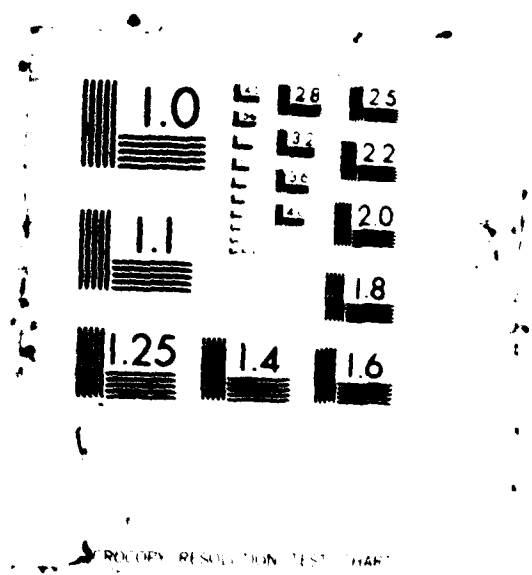
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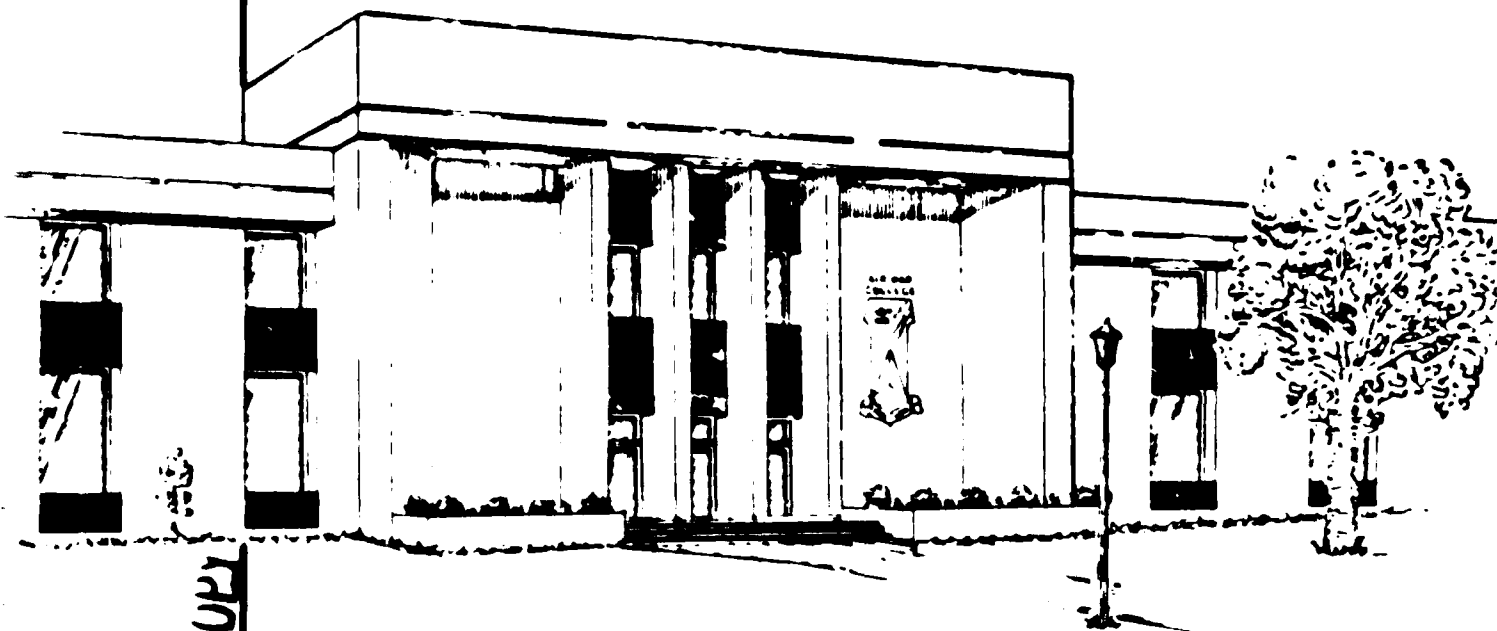
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PILOT RETENTION: AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

By LT COL JOHN D. RHODES

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PILOT RETENTION: AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

by

John D. Rhodes
Lieutenant Colonel USAF

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN

PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE RESEARCH

REQUIREMENT

Research Advisor: Colonel Cecil C. Robins

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

February 1986

DISCLAIMER-ABSTAINER

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AIR WAR COLLEGE RESEARCH REPORT ABSTRACT

TITLE: Pilot Retention: An Historical Analysis

AUTHOR: John D. Rhodes, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

This report focuses on the historical aspects of pilot retention that have plagued the military services since the 1960s. A brief recount of the cyclical rise and fall of pilot retention is followed by an analysis of the major contributing causes within those cycles. Attention is focused primarily on the United States Air Force; however, the United States Navy experiences similar retention problems and corollary reference is also made to that fact.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel John D. Rhodes (B.A., Fresno State College; M.A., Central Michigan University) began his career in the Military Airlift Command in 1970. His interest in pilot retention began as a result of a long-standing association with that command and its intrinsic historical personnel problems associated with pilot retention. He has been a squadron pilot and flight examiner in the C-141A and C-5A aircraft and served a tour at Headquarters, Military Airlift Command as an airlift programming officer and executive support staff officer working retention problems. His most recent assignment was as squadron commander of a C-9A aeromedical airlift squadron at Clark Air Base, Philippines. Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes is a graduate of Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College and the Air War College, class of 1986.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Any rated officer who has served in the Military Airlift Command (MAC), Strategic Air Command (SAC), Tactical Air Command (TAC), or any of the services' commands whose primary business is flying aircraft, has a first-hand knowledge of the periodic traumas caused by the large exodus of pilots from the ranks of those organizations. It is a phenomenon that not only raises issues of considerable complexity but perplexity as well. From this author's perspective, it is a subject that has received a great deal of rhetoric and little substance in resolution. This analysis attempts to correlate this fact through the recurring cycles of pilot retention and the predominantly weak (although sometimes sincere) address of causal factors.

During his tenure as Secretary of Defense, Casper Weinberger has often been one of the leaders of the referenced rhetoric through his comments on various aspects of pilot retention. For example, in his annual report to Congress for fiscal year (FY) 1983, he commented on the pilot shortage which existed at that time in all the military services. His remarks focused on the long-term importance of retaining aviation personnel but offered little substance for attaining that goal. (1:165) Similarly, in a joint statement before Congress, former Secretary of the Air Force, Vern Orr, and former Air Force Chief of Staff, General Lew Allen, Jr., focused their attention and that of Congress on the retention

problem--again with little comment on concrete plans for alleviating the problem.

Retention of our high quality, trained, and experienced people remains our top priority. It is the key to Air Force readiness. As we expand the force in the 1980s, extraordinary retention will be needed to close the experience gap that developed in the late 1970s. (2:34)

Unfortunately, the above comments are not new nor very thought provoking which is a pattern that has too oft been repeated in the past.

From these levels and through the varying perspectives of other senior DOD leadership (especially the commanders-in-chief of the operational flying commands and the senior personnel management specialists in all the services), rated officer retention over the past twenty years has been a subject of wide-ranging and sometimes intense interest. The focus of this attention is usually on those pilots who have completed their initial duty obligation but have not been selected for promotion to major or lieutenant commander as the case may be (basically the 6-11 year-group of aviation officers). Typically, these are the officers who "make or break" the services' retention continuum in terms of excesses or shortages of pilots through their decisions to remain in or exit the service.

A review of the subject matter on pilot retention reveals conclusively that there is a cyclical pattern of pilot overages and pilot shortages within the armed services. Attendant to these patterns is an observable decline or rise of interest/concern which can be extracted from the written media. Simply stated, during periods when excesses or

adequacy of pilot numbers are prevalent, there is little or no comment on the subject. The potential for a reversal of excesses into shortages has not abated but it does appear that the general attitude of military leadership and managers is to focus on more pressing problems at hand--e.g., since pilot retention is not a current problem, it is not a cause for current concern. What few remarks are written, reveal a lack of concern (or perhaps the technical ability) for accurate projections into what the future holds should the excesses become shortages. Conversely, during periods of pilot shortages, there is significant observation, study, retention forecasts and search for solutions to alleviate the problem.

It should be noted that this author is not so naive as to believe that nothing has been done to alleviate retention problems (witness the FY 1981 increase in Aviation Career Incentive Pay [ACIP] as a prime example). However, most individuals would be hard pressed to provide specific examples (of the magnitude of the significant ACIP increase) which show resolve either on the part of service leadership or that of Congress in effectively addressing the issue. The cyclical history and analysis of retention related issues support this view.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORY

Available research material seems to reflect that the history of pilot retention, as a strong issue of major concern to military leadership, is not much more than twenty years old. Nonetheless, the modern era of retention history began at the close of both World War II (WW II) and the Korean War. Following Victory in Japan Day at the close of WW II, the U.S. began a massive demobilization of its forces and equipment--after all, WW II was "the war to end all wars." Although statistics are not available, it is widely known that thousands of pilots exited the Army Air Corps voluntarily and involuntarily because there were so few cockpits available to keep a large, standing pilot corps trained and ready. Literally thousands of aircraft were destroyed or allowed to deteriorate to unserviceable conditions in various "aircraft boneyards." Even as late as June 1950 and the outbreak of the Korean War, pilot resources remained small.

With the outbreak of hostilities in Korea, the "scramble" was on to build a pilot force capable of meeting the demands placed on a fledgling Air Force to fight an enemy some 6,000 miles across the Pacific. A voluntary recall of WW II veterans and a strong aviation cadet pilot training program combined to alleviate the pilot shortage in few brief months. Once again, however, with cessation of hostilities in Korea, the Air Force experienced a stand-down of a large portion of its military forces but not to the extent of the post-WW II era. It is apparent that the U.S. did learn somewhat from the mistake of massive,

post-war demobilization and capitalized on the requirement for a "sufficient" force structure to provide a semblance of deterrence and credible response in the event of a contingency. However, a deemphasis on conventional military forces was prevalent as the U.S. continued to build its strategic missile forces. In essence, from 1953 to 1960, the U.S. sought to take advantage of its superiority in nuclear weapons to contain threats to our national security resulting in significant deemphasis on manned aircraft despite outspoken warnings by Air Force leaders. (3:2)

An adequate pilot force was maintained; however, it appears that an imminent shortage of rated pilots on the horizon was not recognized until late 1963. Several *Air Force Times* articles appeared in late 1963 addressing the problem, i.e., "the need for more pilots has been recognized for some time and several steps have been taken to reduce the shortage." (4:1) In another article, "Air Force officials are becoming increasingly concerned about the shortage of pilots and they see additional difficulties filling cockpits during the late 1960s and early 1970s." (5:2) Table 2-1 below reveals the accuracy of these forecasts and serves as the basis for tracking subject material as we progress through this historical analysis. Table 2-2 reflects the new Air Force methodology of showing retention as cumulative continuation rates (CCR) in percentages. In Table 2-3, a 1966 Navy pilot retention study reflected similar retention problems existing in the Navy and forecast to remain so through FY1974.

ACTIVE DUTY AIR FORCE PILOTS

<u>FY</u>	<u>ROMIS</u>	<u>INVENTORY</u>	<u>+/-</u>	<u>UPT PROD</u>
66	38200	40449	+2249	1969
67	46200	38447	-7753	2768
68	43400	37632	-5768	3092
69	37900	36832	-1068	3216
70	36100	34808	-1292	3521
71	35100	34782	- 318	3895
72	32400	35194	+2794	4032
73	32000	33171	+1171	3033
74	28500	31158	+2658	2167
75	26400	29643	+3243	2003
76	23800	28396	+4596	1674
77	22982	26437	+3455	1310
78	21078	24911	+3833	1050
79	23773	22471	-1302	1047
80	22963	21896	-1067	1543
81	23404	22160	-1244	1850
82	22877	21871	-1006	1908
83	23872	23090	- 782	2000
84	24173	23265	- 908	2000
85	24234	23503	- 731	2100
86	24303	23940	- 363	2100
87	24579	24146	- 433	2100
88	24905	24100	- 805	2100

Table 2-1. Inventory vs Requirements History and Post-1983 Forecast (6:62,67)

PILOTS (6-11 YEAR GROUP)

<u>FY79</u>	<u>FY80</u>	<u>FY81</u>	<u>FY82</u>	<u>FY83</u>	<u>FY84</u>	<u>FY85</u>
26%	42%	54%	*68%	78%	72%	60%

*In 1982, this figure equated to a shortfall of 906 pilots. (8:12)

Table 2-2. Air Force Cumulative Continuation Rates (7:3-141)

NAVY PILOT SHORTFALL

<u>FY</u>	<u>ROMTS</u>	<u>RESOURCES</u>	<u>+/-</u>
66	15986	14755	-1231
67	16069	14340	-1729
68	15728	14184	-1544
69	15916	14010	-1906
70	16017	13796	-2221
71	15907	13670	-2237
72	15592	13561	-2031
73	15482	13678	-1804
74	14380	13690	-1690

Table 2-3. Navy Requirements vs Resources FY 66-74 (9:Figure 2)

A study conducted at the Air University in 1965 referenced an existing pilot shortage at that early date--"the Air Force has about 42,800 pilots on active flying status...this number is below requirements and the situation is not expected to improve." (3:15) Table 2-1, however, shows that there was a one-year improvement in FY 1966 prior to a steady and resounding shortage beginning in FY 1967. The accuracy of the original forecast was, to be sure, far worse than initially expected.

The forecast of pilot deficits in the late 1960s and early 1970s became a reality with increased demands for cockpit duties in Southeast Asia (SEA). Although other comments on reasons for this cycle follow in Chapter 3, it should be noted here that the sudden and severe deficit in FY 1967 (due to increased cockpit requirements and a declining pilot inventory) was adequately addressed by personnel planners and steadily improved over the following four years. The leveling off of pilot losses resulted from two Air Force efforts. The first was an examination of alternatives to involuntary second tours in SEA and the second was a

"stop loss" action on regular officers initiated in 1967 wherein the Air Force made an official plea for those pilots to remain on active duty. The Air Force felt this caused many fliers to reconsider their decisions to leave. (10:1) Coincidental with Air Force actions was an attendant slack in airline hiring. (11:1)

From 1971 through 1978 (the "fat" years), there is virtually nothing written on the pilot retention subject. This, once again, brings attention to the apparent complacency of all the services in making provisions to insure retention problems did not (in the future) become an issue of unmanageable proportions. Less than one year before the FY 1979 slide in pilot retention began, we see a landslide of articles on forecasts, analysis, aircrew concerns, etc., addressing the problem. This time the issue is not on an increasing demand to fill cockpits and a declining inventory with which to fill them because the numbers reflect a steady requirements line and a reducing inventory (see Table 2-1). The reasons (discussed primarily in Chapter 3) are basically "push" and "pull" issues--dissatisfaction with service policies which equate to those issues "pushing" pilots out of the service versus the lure of commercial airline jobs which equate to the issues "pulling" pilots out of the services.

The FY 1979 to FY 1983 retention problem steadily decreased up to 1983 when retention peaked but again began a modest decline in FY 1984 and has continued to this date (7:3-138). A booming economy combined with plentiful airline jobs on the outside and perceptions of eroding service benefits appear to be primary reasons for pilot losses.

Former DCS/Manpower and Personnel, General Duane Cassidy, stated, "We went from the lowest retention period in Air Force history which was 1979, to the highest retention [rates] in Air Force history in about 2 1/2 years, we could swing back...if we're not cautious about what we're doing." (12:24) The following chapter takes a look at those things the services have done/not done and other factors which contributed to these historical (cyclical) swings in pilot retention.

CHAPTER III

THE ANALYSIS

As previously referenced, basically there are two sides to the retention problem--those issues/causes/concerns which "push" pilots out of the services and those which "pull" them out. This analysis will briefly review those push and pull factors which have impacted retention over the past twenty years with an occasional comment on proposed solutions.

Without restating the opening comments in Chapter 2, suffice it to say that post-WW II and Korean War retention issues were basically push-oriented. Demobilization after WW II and emphasis on strategic missile forces vice manned flight in the post-Korean War era were main reasons that large reductions in pilot forces were seen.

In the mid to early 1960s, we begin to see official and unofficial study/insight into retention issues as forecasts of pilot shortages become a reality. In November 1963, for example, the Department of Defense approved an increase in the rate of pilot production from 2,000 to 2,700 each year but forecast it to be FY 1967 or 1968 before this new figure could be reached. (4:2) In another example, a 1965 Air War College study states, "the loss of young pilots has caused increased concern among tactical unit commanders as they strive to maintain authorized manning levels." This same study also revealed that the commercial airlines were having difficulties recruiting enough pilots for their needs and this trend was expected to continue with the carriers focusing their lure on military pilots.

The study recommended a retention solution through continuation of a semblance of the aviation cadet program with the bottom line being that a college education was not a necessity for entry into pilot training. (3:14,17,45) Such a proposal when viewed in conjunction with the oft discussed "dual track"/pilot specialist career approach would certainly have reduced future pilot shortages; however, no one was willing to tackle existing personnel policies that mandated an all-college-degree officer force. The "whole-man" concept and the thoughts that all officers might some day want to become Air Force Chief of Staff negated the pilot specialist proposal and banned the aviation cadet program to its place in history.

A 1966 Navy Pilot Retention Study was the first to look at the push/pull factors affecting pilots shortages. While the study addressed several innovative long and near-term solutions to the Navy's critical pilot resource problem, more significantly it provided an in-depth comparison of the total compensation between the military and commercial airline pilot which obviously showed a substantial variance in favor of the airlines. This fact (a pull) combined with the "high tempo of operations" and associated deprivations of a naval aviator's family life (pushers) were seen as the most significant reasons for the increases in aviation officers leaving active duty. (9:VII-D-1). Increases in bonuses and flight pay to naval aviators appear to have been the only change in naval policy to address the pull issues over the years. Very little was (or has been) implemented to alleviate the push issues.

Moving to the pilot shortages of 1968-1971, the majority of

documented issues addressed are those that push pilots out of the Air Force. Among the majority of reasons given in a 1970 survey were: being "frozen" to the cockpit too long (one survey is quoted which said 80 percent of the pilots wanted non-crew jobs sometime before their twelfth year of service); dissatisfaction with promotion opportunities to the field grades; and, not enough money. (13:17) A 1971 survey of Air Force pilots revealed that over one third wanted out mainly for perceptions that (1) career opportunities were better on the outside, and (2) a career in uniform is "somewhat less attractive" than one in civilian clothes. (14:6) The latter survey was rather vague in differentiating between the two reasons but both of the above surveys taken together show a high degree of perceived unhappiness (pushers) within the Air Force system.

Former Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, in his 1970 DOD posture statement, identified a major retention concern as being "officer loss rates" in general and not just pilot loss rates. He proposed several "personnel programs" to assist in promoting retention but stated, "like other 'people' items in the budget, there is little money for any dramatic expansion of such programs." (15:1) This statement speaks volumes for attitudes that permeated the ranks of senior DOD leadership in this era. Declining cockpit requirements, the drawdown in SEA activities, and the "catch up" in pilot training production rates were key reasons in the reversal of pilot shortages in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Very little was done to address the core irritant (push) issues addressed in the surveys referenced above. It is also worth mentioning that, as the shortages become excesses,

pilots were involuntarily shifted to rated supplement duties or encouraged to separate.

As we approach the pilot deficit years of the late 1970s and early 1980s, it is fairly apparent that there is an equality of sorts between the push and pull aspects of the problem. The two major issues in this era are dissatisfaction with military life (push) and expanded airline hiring (pull). (16:E3361) From the push aspect, the following five common career irritants surfaced in surveys by MAC, TAC, SAC and ATC: uncertainty about the future (pay, benefits, promotions, retirement, etc.); the OER system; the perceived inability of leadership to effect change; lack of individual influence on the assignment process; and, family disruptions. (17:2) Less than a year later, former Commander in Chief SAC, General Bennie Davis, summarized those steps the Air Force was taking to alleviate the irritants: creation of special retention groups; elimination of the controlled OER system; implementation of a selective continuation program; initiation of special crew member briefings and squadron commander symposiums; elimination of additional duties; increased pilot involvement in the assignment process; pushes for higher incentive pay (which was subsequently adopted); and, pushes to reverse the on-going pay caps and restore pay comparability (which was partially successful). (18:8) In essence, it was the first time that real efforts were undertaken by Air Force leadership to address the irritants surfaced by its pilot force. Similar efforts were undertaken by Navy and Marine leadership to address the push issues. The Navy's point of view was that they couldn't compete monetarily with the

airlines so their approach was to "offer a lifetime career that has a lot more to it than just driving an airplane." (19:A28) The well-meaning behind such an approach is commendable but doesn't address the pilot who wants to do nothing but "drive an airplane" and get paid a somewhat comparable salary as his commercial counterpart.

MAC's Pilot Retention Working Groups, ATC's Officer Retention Workshops, USAFE's Creek Nickel Aircrew Studies, TAC's Aircrew Concerns Conferences, and the Navy's Blue/Gold Retention Issues Seminars were all forerunners of efforts ongoing today to address irritant issues and resolve them through command leadership and involvement. Given the boom of the U.S. economy and attendant airline hiring (the big pull), these efforts at least show "good faith" on the part of the services to address those issues under respective purviews which push pilots out of the service. The pull of airline hiring will not abate while the economy flourishes. "With the economy booming, the major airlines are beginning to recover from past years of low passenger rates and high fuel costs by building up their fleets, flying more routes and offering lower fares." (20:1) 1986 and 1987 will be years of major airline hiring. Despite good intentions in resolving irritants, current pay caps and attacks on the retirement system will do little to entice those 6-11 year group pilots (and greater numbers of retirement-eligible pilots being hired by upstart airlines) to remain in the service--and will do even less in the long-term effort to reverse current or unforeseen (as usual) retention problems.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

The history is factual--the services do experience cycles of pilot shortages and excesses. Similarly, the causes are also factual. The significant observation to be made from all this is that in our short Air Force history, long-term solutions to prevent recurrence of either the history or the causes have not been adequately carried out. Pressing retention problems have usually been resolved through expedient, short-term solutions and the problem focus continues to emphasize the differences between the military pilot profession (patriotism, duty, honor, country) and the civilian pilot occupation. Senior DOD leadership and Congress must realize that it is time to change the weight of focus to the "occupational" and push aspects of the retention issue--increasing ACIP and taking measures to narrow the pay comparability gap between the military and private sectors.

The airline industry is in a period of unprecedented growth and industry analysts forecast commercial pilot shortages through the early 1990s due to continued expansion and high numbers of airline pilot retirements. Consequently, military pilots who are dissatisfied with military life will remain the prime source of "highly trained, disciplined and experienced aviators." (21:19)

The 1985 *Air Force Issues Book* has the rhetoric and the answers for resolving retention oriented problems--restore pay comparability, increase ACIP, improve medical and dental services, maintain commissary and exchange privileges, preserve an attractive

retirement system, and maintain favorable tax treatment of allowances. (21:18-19). Addressing these issues squarely will negate the need for traditional routines in the study, analysis, forecast, etc., of retention issues and, if implemented, the cyclical problems will disappear. Let us hope that the Congress, DOD and our services' senior leadership have learned the retention lesson of the past twenty years-- that is, failure to address core retention issues leads to instability in the pilot force which in turn leads to pilot deficits of potentially serious proportions.

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